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Death Came from the Skies



Hamburg, July 1943
From a child's perspective

Translation from the German original by
Andreas J. Voigt, 18 April 2025

It had been a particularly warm, sunny July day, the likes of which one doesn't often experience in Hamburg. As so often, we had, dressed in our evening clothes, enjoyed the calming water and garden landscape of the Inner and Outer Alster Lakes on a long walk.

We lived in Hamburg's city center (Heuberg) in a large residential block consisting of commercial and private apartments, about 300 meters from Jungfernstieg and the Inner Alster Lake.

Now we—my older sister, my two-year-old brother, and I—lay safe and tired in bed. An elderly lady from the apartment next door watched over us while my mother made her way to the main train station to pick up my father, who was stationed in northern Germany as a Wehrmacht soldier. A war wound sustained in Ukraine was being healed there. To our great joy, he was allowed to spend his days of leave in Hamburg.

My parents had just returned to the apartment, my mother had just put the kettle on for an evening cup of coffee and cut the freshly baked cake, when the sirens wailed on full alert and the drone of the bombers filled our ears. We were hastily dragged out of bed and dressed in the clothes that had been left out from the afternoon. My mother grabbed her always-ready handbag, which contained papers and photos, and then we dashed like lightning from the fourth floor down the stairs to the basement. There was a window between the third and fourth floors. I peered out curiously and was horrified to see the flaring "Christmas Trees" illuminating the sky and the bombs falling in masses.

During previous attacks, I had always maintained a stoic calm and hated being roused from my sleep. With the wisdom of a six-year-old, I took the stance that if I don't hurt the bombs, they won't hurt me. What I saw through the window in a second put an end to that stance forever.

We huddled in the basement with the other residents. Everyone was preoccupied with their own thoughts and fears. My father couldn't stay in the basement. He raced up the four floors to the attic and extinguished fires wherever he found them, eighteen in all. But he alone couldn't withstand the force of a thousand-bomb load that had fallen on the neighboring building and spread in a flash to our block.

When father returned to the basement, he took my weeping mother in his arms and told her that everything was lost and that everyone had to leave the basement as quickly as possible because the smoke would suffocate us. The basement, which was considered bomb-proof, was already beginning to fill with smoke. With wet handkerchiefs over our faces, we rushed to the building's foyer, where the only exit to the outside was ablaze. My father grabbed a lonely wood chair and smashed the window next to the house exit, through which we all escaped.

The all-clear hadn't been given yet. Our group had to find a new place to stay immediately. 50 meters down the street, at the corner of Große Bleichen and Bleichenbrücke, stood the still relatively undamaged merchant's house (it was intended to survive the war), where we temporarily fled, led by my father, while he continued on his way to scout

out a bunker in Große Bleichen, which then housed us for the rest of the night.

As we stepped out of the merchant's house, I stole a glance at our apartment building, where I had spent such beautiful, carefree, happy, and sheltered years. It stood there, a silent and dark silhouette rising up into the fire-lit sky. Flames blazed from the roof above, devouring the house from within, and with it, the dreams of my childhood.

Across the street, not 5 meters away from us, a blazing building collapsed with a crash and crackle, sending a torrent of phosphorus rain in our direction. A spark must have hit me in the face. I sustained an injury, and my mother feared I might go blind. Fortunately, that wasn't the case.

I can't remember if I was afraid. There was no time to be afraid. We were running for our lives. This bombing raid was a completely new experience, not just for me, but for all of us. I trusted my father completely that he would lead us safely out of this hell.

We had survived previous attacks on Hamburg, which caused relatively little damage. Yes, we children enjoyed strolling through the streets of the city center the day after the attack and looking at the damage. These attacks primarily aimed at destroying infrastructure, such as the harbor. For the first time, more than just infrastructure was destroyed. Nevertheless, I don't believe this attack was aimed at the civilian population, because there were relatively few civilians living in the city center. Perhaps it was a practice attack for what was to come.

As soon as the first rays of dawn announced the arrival of day, my father set off for my aunts' apartment, about 4 or 5 km away, on the other side of the city center, on the very edge of St. Georg. Here, the buildings were all residential, which had escaped the bombing that night. We laboriously made our way through the streets, where the bright daylight vividly demonstrated the destruction of the night.

My two aunts' apartment was a safe haven—or so we believed. But we barely had time to settle in and recover from the horror of the attack when, in the dark, the alarm sounded again. Once again, we hastily hurried down to the basement; I was wearing only the pajamas belonging to my somewhat short aunt, which were far too large. There was no time to put on extra clothing. Once again, we sat silently on the chairs and benches, waiting for what was to come. Only this time, the basement population was considerably larger, as five floors were occupied by civilians. Once again, my father, who had now been given special leave to bring his family to safety, took over the duties of air raid warden and patrolled the stairwell at a rapid pace. And once again, we had to leave the house as quickly as possible, not because smoke was seeping into the basement—that hadn't happened yet—but because my father discovered a time fuse in the shaft of the building that could explode at any moment and tear the house apart.

But where should we turn? Here, too, my father had discovered that not too far away, the air raid shelter had used dynamite to breach a wall leading to the subway. This would prove to be our salvation. My father led the group, carrying my brother in his arms, followed by my mother, who led

me by the hand, then my aunt and my sister, followed by everyone else. As I stepped out of the doorway, I stood frozen with terror on the top step, tore myself away from my mother's hand, and screamed, "I'm not going through that!" My mother, driven by her own momentum, ran after my father, wailing, "I've lost Margit." (I often wondered later in life, and never dared to ask my parents, what my father thought of my mother at that moment.) I beheld an unimaginable inferno. Every house was ablaze, fanned by the strong winds. Phosphorus rain pelted and swirled from the sky, and the street seemed like hot coals. To my left, I saw people slipping past me one after the other like shadows; they ignored me; everyone was preoccupied with themselves and their own rescue. Suddenly, I felt myself lifted into the air by strong arms and saw a broad man's chest before me, into which I hid so I wouldn't have to look into hell anymore. I felt my pajama pants slip off me as we ran.

After a few minutes that felt like an eternity, I felt solid ground beneath my feet again, peered into a dark corridor, and saw above me the faces of my father and my savior. My savior was a young Dutchman who lived in the apartment building and knew my aunts and us children well. My father, after knowing the rest of his family was safe, had turned around immediately and was on his way back to the apartment building to get me. He would have been too late, because the timer exploded shortly after all the residents had left the building. Only rubble remained. That's what you call being lucky in an unlucky situation.

Through the long corridor, this time holding my father's hand, we reached the subway tunnel, where we spent the

rest of the night crouching on the tracks, along with a large crowd of passersby. The next morning, my father examined the damage from the previous night in daylight. His report was horrifying: the bodies lay piled up on top of each other at the side of the road. To spare ourselves, especially us children, this sight, we walked a long way along the tracks until we came to a subway exit that was not affected by the firestorm of the night.

A bus took us to a large refugee reception camp in Neumünster for further distribution across northern Germany. A new episode, that of the evacuees, began. We wouldn't see Hamburg again for more than four years.

My father was awarded several military medals as a soldier, all of which he threw into a stream at the end of the war because they would have hindered his escape from Russian captivity. For me, however, he was the hero who saved his family and all the other residents of the house from certain death. He didn't receive a medal for that. Most of the cellar occupants were women and children. But I remember a few men. Not one of them, except the Dutchman, showed any initiative. Everyone willingly followed the Wehrmacht soldier.

Epilogue:

One might wonder why, after so long, I am willing to put these memories on paper. There are several reasons for this:

Perhaps no other war has been written about or filmed more than the Second World War. We are far from seeing the end. Much of what is reported is distorted or too one-sided.

The Jewish community has developed an art, a religion, an industry out of its suffering [note from the DHK: read "The Holocaust Industry" by the US political scientist Prof. Norman Finkelstein]. A person from Mars could be forgiven for thinking that only this group suffered. Everyone suffered: the guilty and the victim. And who is the guilty and who is the victim? Some balance must be brought to these war reports.

I read Jörg Friedrich's "The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945" and I am shocked. My experiences pale in comparison to those in the book. "The Fire" is technically and statistically very detailed, but it only deals briefly (I'd almost call it point form) with the personal fears and anxieties of those affected. What thoughts were running through people's minds, how did they suffer, were they heroes or cowards, etc., etc. Even if one cannot produce a comprehensive organization like Steven Spielberg's "Shoah Foundation," perhaps some readers, upon reading this account, will be prompted to share their decades-old secrets with the rest of the world. I only hope that "The Fire" will be translated into other languages, especially English [note from the DHK: it was translated by Allison Brown and published 2006].

The younger generations are interested in the past. In Australia, ANZAC is celebrated every year on April 25th. It

is primarily for those who died in the First World War (there are no survivors from the First World War), but has now been expanded to include all wars since then. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the WWI generation are beginning to show great interest. They work through family documents, wear the decorations of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, and travel to military cemeteries in other countries.

Our son, now 30 years old and born and raised here in Australia, is very interested in his parents recording their war experiences (in English, of course, as he has difficulty with German). I am convinced that when he has children and grandchildren, this interest will grow.

Margit Alm

25 May 2003

Melbourne, Australia

We sincerely thank Mrs. Alm (picture, right) for having the courage to recount the deeply felt and terrifying memories of her childhood, thus sharing them with Germany's young generation, who have not yet completely shed the burden of the "perpetrator nation" and "collective guilt" imposed on them by foreign powers. May many other poets and authors also boldly step forward.

Reconciliation must be our common goal, but this is not a call to forget, to disre-



member, for the Allied bombing terror was an appalling crime of war, an inexcusable atrocity—the demands for justice and commemoration must never expire.

The Deutschherrenklub is proud to be able to exclusively present this objective and moving account of the facts by a contemporary witness to our esteemed readers. A mosaic piece in the building of a new German dawn.

DHK, June 2003

Postscript of the Deutschherrenklub:

Word quickly spread around the world that something unprecedented had happened in and around Hamburg. Among those present were Ernst Jünger, now a Wehrmacht officer in Paris, and Bertolt Brecht, an exile in the USA. The shock is palpable in their diaries.

In New York, the writer Julien Green reports in his diary without comment a report from Stockholm (which he took from the New York Times of 5 August 1943):

"A German child, a refugee from Hamburg, reaches the border after the horrific bombing of Hamburg by the RAF. The child is twelve years old. He is carrying two bags that he must open in front of the customs officers; the first contains the little boy's rabbits, the second the body of his two-year-old brother."

Source: Spiegel Online